

Japanese Customs and Phrases

While the Japanese ways may seem foreign to you, remember that in reality, we Americans are foreigners in this country. As Americans in Japan, we are not expected to act exactly as the Japanese, but we are expected to respect their customs and practices. It is neither necessary nor appropriate to emulate each custom and mannerism of our hosts. For example, an overemphasis on bowing by an American could be construed as a mockery, which would be far worse than no bow at all. A general rule to follow is to practice good manners and etiquette as we would in an American setting and to couple these with a touch of modesty.

Following are customs which Americans are expected to observe among the Japanese:

Saluting and Bowing: In Japan, saluting and bowing are common and highly respected practices within both military and civilian sectors. Japanese military personnel render the hand salute on all occasions when greeting another military service member or counterpart, regardless of rank. It is appropriate for U.S. military members to greet their Japanese military counterparts of all ranks with a proper military hand salute. As in the U.S. Army, saluting is usually restricted to outdoors.

Bowing within the military ranks is commonly practiced in addition to the hand salute as a means of extending courtesy and respect. As Americans, we are not expected to bow as deeply from the waist as would a Japanese, but bowing is highly recommended as a gesture of goodwill and respect. Bowing is appropriate both indoors and outdoors.

Reciprocating Social Invitations: In Japan, the feeling of obligation to return the favor of one social occasion with another is very strong. It should be understood to refuse reciprocation from the Japanese without a good reason could be misunderstood and construed by them as offensive. A social event to reciprocate after an event hosted by a Japanese should be timely and in proportion to the event for which reciprocation is intended.

Gift Giving and Receiving: Giving and receiving gifts is a traditional year-round custom in Japan. There are special seasons when gift giving is practiced more than others, but the Japanese are prone to gift giving and delight in this practice any time an occasion presents itself, from informal visits to one's homes to more formal affairs such as weddings, birthdays and welcome and sayonara parties. Gifts range in price and simplicity according to one's economic status. If a gift is accepted from Japanese, reciprocation in kind is in order. There are circumstances under which regulations prevent USARJ members from receiving gifts from the Japanese. Since gift giving is an established and treasured Japanese tradition, acceptance or non-acceptance of a gift can be a very sensitive issue. To refuse under normal circumstances may be construed by the Japanese as offensive. It is suggested that Army Regulation 672-5-1 and USFJ Policy Letter 125-4 be consulted to provide guidance in accepting or politely refusing a gift.

Formal Receptions: The Japanese system of formal receptions is well organized and highly orchestrated. Timing is the single most important element due mainly to the high cost of renting banquet rooms and supporting staff. All functions involving the host nation of Japan is expected to start and stop with military precision at appointed times. Even social affairs are viewed with seriousness among the Japanese. Appropriate dress, deportment and decorum are expected. The guest of honor at any function participates in the program by giving a short, but meaningful speech and raising a toast.

Spouse/Family Member Participation in Business Events: Involvement of a spouse or family member in a business meeting or business-related social activity is not usually practiced. When spouses are present, the majority of discussion is left to the principals of the occasion.

Seniority: In Japan, age and seniority are highly respected at all levels of the society. Nowhere is this more evident than in the close-knit Japanese family where there is solidarity among members and elders are consistently shown the greatest respect. To befriend Japanese is to be accepted by the entire family, but to offend one family member will result in rejection by all. USARJ members are strongly encouraged to respect the importance of seniority and age in the Japanese culture and to act with the same good manners and considerations their Japanese counterparts display toward senior citizens.

Letter of Congratulations: It is customary and highly recommended that Americans make courtesy calls or send letters of congratulations to their Japanese counterparts on important official, semiofficial or private occasions. The Japan Self-Defense Forces usually announce transfers, promotions and retirements of senior officers twice a year. At that time it is customary to send letters of congratulations. USARJ protocol policy and regulations will provide guidance on format, contents and timeliness of such letters. For a private occasion, a simple but sincere personal note is appropriate. Remember, whether acting officially or unofficially, USARJ personnel are American representatives in Japan. When in doubt about the appropriate action to take, it is best to contact the USARJ Public Affairs Office for advice.

American Women and Japanese Society: American women are highly respected in Japanese society for their intelligence, education, sense of independence and positions of leadership in public life. Japanese women are also highly respected in their society, but for different aspects of the same basic qualities. A misconception held by many Americans is that Japan is a "man's" country and that Japanese women are weak and submissive. Japanese women, though certainly not weak, enjoy appearing meek since this is considered a major part of their refinement and charm in contrast to American women who are taught to be more assertive and open in expressing opinions. Cultural exchanges and understanding between American and Japanese women are strongly encouraged.

Punctuality: The Japanese are punctual. If a Japanese person makes an appointment, no matter how casual or informal it may seem at the time, it is considered a commitment. Accordingly, all USARJ personnel are urged to be punctual in keeping both personal and official appointments with Japanese friends and associates. The impression we make on our Japanese hosts by being punctual can make a difference in the continued respect the Japanese have for Americans.

Role of Consensus: Japanese culture dictates that the individual will try whenever possible to avoid embarrassing another. In communicating with others this has the very practical result that Japanese is more likely, when questioned, to give a subtle and indirect response rather than the usual American direct answer to a specific question. These attitudes and behavior patterns are important aspects of the Japanese culture and need to be remembered in both business and social interactions.

Social Etiquette: In general, Japanese people tend to work hard and to play hard. They are very attentive hosts at gatherings. Japanese social affairs often require the presentation of short speeches or toasts or active participation in entertainment such as singing for the rest of the group. No one expects professional singing ability, just genuine goodwill. Americans are encouraged to mingle freely and to make acquaintance with Japanese friends. Modesty should be the rule in social interactions. Over indulgence or boisterous behavior tends to leave poor impressions with our Japanese hosts. A common topic of conversation when Japanese get together with American friends is the use of chopsticks (Hashi) by foreign guests, amateur use of chopsticks, even with obvious difficulty, is acceptable. Usually the Japanese are impressed at the effort to try and will compliment the foreigner on skillful use of chopsticks.

Three basic rules to remember in using chopsticks are:

1. Never pass food from chopsticks to chopsticks because this is a ceremonial gesture used during cremation services.
2. Never stand chopsticks straight up in rice bowl because this gesture is used when making food offerings to the dead.
3. Never spear food with chopsticks because this is considered impolite.

English Language and the Japanese: English is taught in all levels of Japanese schools beginning with junior high. Japanese teaching methods concentrate more on reading and writing than on conversational English. As a consequence, most Japanese are eager for opportunities to practice conversational skills in English. One caution for Americans is to remember that English is a second language for the Japanese and we should not assume their comprehension and response levels will be the same as Americans who are speaking English. In general, we can enhance their comprehension by speaking slowly and distinctly and avoiding excessive slang, baby talk or pidgin English, which they will not have the background to understand. Americans are encouraged while in Japan to learn something of the Japanese language and to demonstrate interest in people here by trying to communicate with them in their own language.

Tatami Floors and the Wearing of Shoes: Although many modern-day Japanese homes are constructed with western style hardwood floors, many others continue to use traditional tatami mats or woven rice straw flooring. Unlike Americans, Japanese do not wear street shoes in the house. Wearing shoes while entering a Japanese home is considered offensive; one reason for removing shoes is sanitation. Another is wearing on tatami mats. An additional reason is a religious custom that only the deceased wear shoes for wakes and funerals. If a host invites you to do so, it is permissible to enter a home wearing shoes. In the absence of a statement from the host, you should always remove shoes at the door. In most cases, the host will offer slippers to wear in place of shoes.

PHRASES

Ohayou gozaimasu	.....	Good Morning
Konnichiwa	.....	Good afternoon
Konbanwa	.....	Good Evening
Oyasuminasai	.....	Good night
Sayonara	.....	Good Bye
Douzo	.....	Please
Dewa mata	.....	See you later
Mata ashita	.....	See you tomorrow
Hajimemashite	.....	How do you do?
Douzo yoroshiku	.....	Pleased to meet you
Kochirakoso	.....	The pleasure is mine
Genki desu ka	.....	How are you?
Okagesamade arigatou gozaimasu	.....	I am fine, thank you
Doumo arigatou gozaimasu	.....	Thank you very much
Doutashimashite	.....	You are welcome
Wakarimasen	.....	I don't understand

In daily Japanese, the phrase “O-ne-ga-i-shi-masu” is used as a polite expression to enable you to accomplish your request in many situations. Examples of these situations are “I want/I need/May I have/Would you/Will you do me a favor?” etc. Onegaishimasu literally means “Please do...”

English: Excuse me, may I have NOUN please?

Japanese: Sumimasen, NOUN o onegaishimasu

English: Please take me to the LOCATION.

Japanese: LOCATION tsurete itte kudasai.

English: Excuse me, where is NOUN?

Japanese: Sumimasen, NOUN wa dokodesuka?

English: Excuse me, how much is it?

Japanese: Sumimasen, ikuradesuka?

English: I'm lost.

Japanese: Michi ni mayoimashita

English: Excuse me, please help me.

Japanese: Sumimasen tasukete kudasai

English: I need an interpreter

Japanese: Tsuuyaku o

English: Do you speak English?

Japanese: Eego o hanasemasuka?